

ArtsAmplified Initiative Highlights



An Eight-Year Partnership Between Barr and 15 Arts Organizations to Strengthen Their Leadership in Massachusetts Communities

In 2018, the Barr Foundation's Arts & Creativity Team launched ArtsAmplified, a multiyear investment in 15 Massachusetts arts organizations designed to support them in leading meaningful, yet challenging, organizational change to deepen community impact.

ArtsAmplified funded and connected these organizations as they built capacities they believed were necessary to pursue their ambitious change goals. Initiative supports were co-designed with grantee partners, evolving throughout the years as deemed necessary. The eight-year partnership generated learnings and insights that can benefit arts funders and supporters.

ArtsAmplified was grounded in Barr's Arts & Creativity program goal, which is to amplify the power and possibilities of the arts to realize a just, thriving Massachusetts.

ARTSAMPLIFIED KEY FEATURES

Over \$35.5 million invested in 15 arts organizations over eight years

Two cycles of three-year unrestricted grants + targeted funding for special projects, bold organizational change, and collaborations

Coaching, technical assistance, and cohort gatherings

ARTSAMPLIFIED GRANTEE PARTNERS

Collectively, these leaders represent a range of art forms, geographies, sizes, and contexts



Photo by Geoff Hargadon, image courtesy The Greenway.

A process of co-discovery

In building the ArtsAmplified cohort, Barr focused on organizations with strong staff leadership who presented a proclivity for reinvention and risk-taking, and both the willingness and ability to engage in strategic dialogue around change in a changing world. Many had already been exploring questions about relevance amid changing demographics and expectations, fresh ways to engage community, and how to experiment while maintaining organizational stability.

The initiative approach emphasized co-design and learning. Partners had autonomy to shape projects based on their unique contexts and priorities, and the flexibility to revise projects through implementation. They also contributed to the ArtsAmplified learning agenda, identifying challenges and topics with shared interest.

General operating funds fueled bold action. Grantee partners proposed ambitious projects, funded by Barr, that they deemed significant to their futures. Their priorities included pursuing artistic innovation, enhancing community engagement, and building internal capacity in fundraising, technology, or other arenas. Awards were issued as unrestricted grants, maximizing flexibility.

Supplemental funds recognized the importance of risk capital. Based on partner interests, in 2019 Barr made additional grants to finance special projects with the potential to accelerate leadership impact. These funds were used to test new ideas that required dedicated attention and capital.

Coaching and connections supported learning and effectiveness. Barr engaged arts sector consultants Ashley Berendt and Susan Nelson at TDC to develop theories of change and assist grantee partners in the design of leadership projects. TDC also orchestrated networking and learning opportunities, including forums involving multiple staff from each organization and smaller-scale exchanges for executives.



ARTSAMPLIFIED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

At a conceptual level, ArtsAmplified was framed as an investigation into the intersections between four concepts considered central to arts leadership in vibrant communities: artistic excellence, relevance, risk-taking, and civic leadership. Over time, the framework became less central to the initiative to honor organizations' pursuit of their own conceptions of arts leadership. The four concepts remained a loose scaffold for organizing grantee partners' work and a springboard for conversation, exploration, and shared learning within the cohort.



Photo by Nick Cave, image courtesy MASS MoCA.

Adapting to disruption, embracing risk and transformation

The stakes for arts leaders rose significantly in 2020, as the onset of the pandemic closely followed by the murder of George Floyd profoundly altered the sector and its role in society. ArtsAmplified partners faced urgent concerns: a precipitous loss of audiences and revenue alongside elevated expectations to combat social injustice.

These leaders responded with a heightened focus on equity and antiracism in their practices and structures. Most also began to reimagine their audience and community engagement models, as well as their staffing and financial models.

Barr and TDC sought to offer timely assistance by increasing access to knowledge, skills, and peer experience focused on issues specific to the pandemic and racial justice; by continuing unrestricted funds to boost financial assurance amid this volatile time; and by providing new supplemental funds to support leadership risk taking and experiments.

Extending the initiative

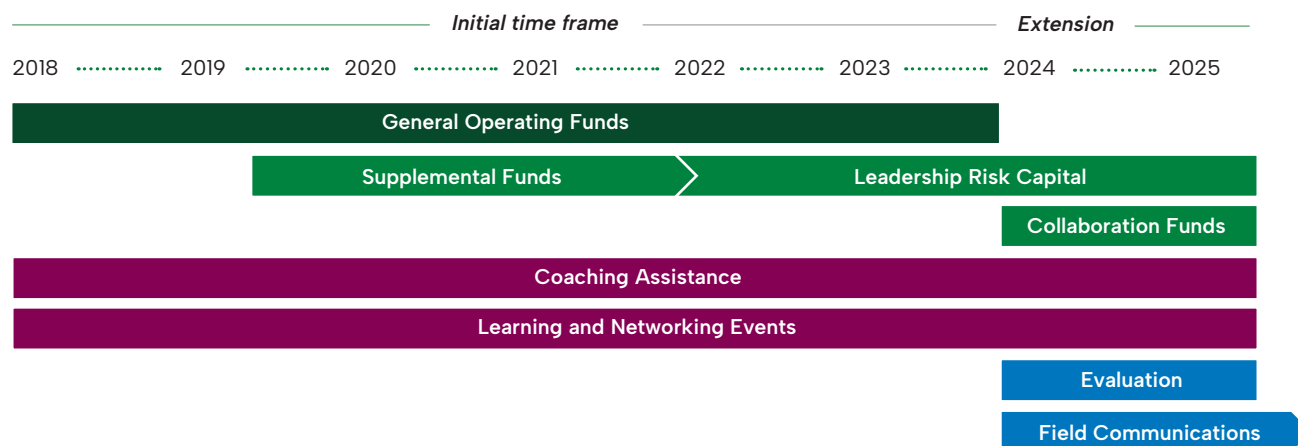
In 2023, as most grantee partners were mid-stream in grappling with major changes, Barr chose to extend ArtsAmplified. Originally slated to conclude that year, the initiative instead continued through 2025 with three aims: supporting partners in evolving their organizational and artistic leadership, encouraging increased collaboration across the cohort, and capturing and sharing leadership lessons and insights with the arts field.

Cohort learning and networking activities continued through 2025. Multiyear unrestricted operating grants concluded in 2023, and a new round of Leadership Risk Capital grants was offered for projects spanning 2024 and 2025.



Photo by Liz Linder Photography, image courtesy Silkroad.

INVESTING IN ARTS LEADERS: ARTSAMPLIFIED TIMELINE AND COMPONENTS





Left: Photo by Shinique Smith, image courtesy The Greenway. Middle: Photo by Kathy Tarantola, image courtesy Peabody Essex Museum. Right: Photo by Krystyn Ulanday, image courtesy Institute of Contemporary Art Boston.

Leadership risk capital

Grantee partners and Barr understood there are times when targeted capital, in addition to general operating support, is necessary for organizations to tackle large-scale change projects and bold experiments that could not otherwise be supported by annual budgets. With this additional support, ArtsAmplified partners could test breakthrough ideas and further their change journeys. For example:

The Greenway reinvented its public art commissioning process by assembling the largest cohort of diverse artists and projects in the organization's history.

ArtsEmerson convened leaders and artists as the starting point in a pilot project aimed at building solidarity among Black and Indigenous changemakers.

The Huntington experimented with ways to deepen and expand support models for staff and artists such as reduced rehearsal schedule hours, pay equity increases, and paid refresh days for staff.

Peabody Essex Museum pursued specialized training for staff and curators who interact with content and visitors in non-traditional ways—supporting unique experiences and deeper audience engagement.

MASS MoCA experimented with changes to its performing arts delivery model, moving from high volume and low margins to a fewer number of carefully curated works with longer lead and run times.

Descriptions of risk projects for each of the 15 ArtsAmplified partners are at barrfdn.link/riskcapital.

Collaboration grants

In 2024, Barr launched the Collaboration Fund to seed and support partnerships that have the potential to impact sector or civic issues. Barr observed the collective learning and relationship development between cohort members, and offered the Fund to support the exploration of collaborative experiments.

Four pairs of partners received grant funding for projects addressing topics with wide relevance to arts organizations across the U.S.:

- **Testing a digital strategy for engaging young audiences** that features a new mobile app for marketing, ticketing, membership, and promotion of social events tailored to this audience. Grantee partners: Celebrity Series and GrubStreet.
- **Celebrating cultural influencers**, including those passionate about arts in BIPOC communities, and involving them in content creation to access new audiences via their social media channels. Grantee partners: American Repertory Theater and Global Arts Live.
- **Boosting climate activism in the museum community**, with a focus on research and recommendations specific to smaller and mid-size museums. Grantee partners: The Institute of Contemporary Art and The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.
- **Sharing knowledge and resources** to help arts organizations more effectively engage community partners, expand opportunities for artists, and support a stronger sector. Grantee partners: ArtsEmerson and The Huntington.

Evaluation and reflection

The Barr Foundation commissioned a summative study from Sarah Lee Consulting involving extensive interviews and analysis to capture the change journeys of all 15 ArtsAmplified partners. Findings from this reflective evaluation are summarized here.

Eight dimensions of change

The unique design of ArtsAmplified required a nuanced approach to documenting organizational change. Grantee partners described change not in traditional organizational development terms, but through the lens of values, systems, and relationships that shape their organizational culture and inform how they develop and present artistic work. ArtsAmplified partners articulated this evolution along eight dimensions:

- 1. Deepening and expanding community engagement.** Thirteen ArtsAmplified partners described adopting a range of strategies to center community member voices, interests, and needs in the design, development, and execution of artistic programming—from doing more work in partnership with community-based organizations to inviting community members into curatorial practices, artistic planning, and program design.
- 2. Embedding commitments to civic and social impact.** Nine partners described undertaking change to clarify, institutionalize, and activate commitments to civic and social impact—including leveraging the arts and their influence in service to the public good by inviting audiences to engage in civic action, amplifying traditionally marginalized stories, and leveraging their own resources to respond to community needs.
- 3. Changing staffing structures and personnel.** Nine partners underwent substantial changes to staffing during the period of ArtsAmplified. Often these changes were made to accelerate efforts to deepen community engagement and activate civic impact.
- 4. Undertaking major capital projects.** Seven partners described initiating, advancing, or completing major capital projects during ArtsAmplified, including redeveloping existing performance or exhibition spaces and building entirely new spaces. For these organizations, their facilities projects have become literal and conceptual spaces for activating community engagement and civic leadership.
- 5. Transforming internal organizational culture.** Six partners described reshaping their internal organizational culture, particularly in the context of opening up institutional decision-making processes to include more staff and artist ownership.
- 6. Investing in programmatic experimentation and innovation.** Five partners described programming changes in pursuit of bolder, more ambitious artistic work, as well as innovations in the ways audiences experience the work.
- 7. Strengthening capacity for long-term, strategic decision-making.** Four partners described enhancing their decision-making capacity during this period, developing a much stronger sense of alignment across their staff and boards around a shared strategic vision compared to 2017—likely connected to their efforts to define organizational values and strengthen organizational culture.
- 8. Stabilizing financial position.** Three partners described changes focused on financial stability, such as establishing an endowment or solidifying their working capital base.

Influential factors

The ArtsAmplified partners' change journeys over this period cannot be divorced from the COVID-19 pandemic, nor the racial justice uprising catalyzed by George Floyd's murder in the spring and summer of 2020. And while the shutdowns forced by the pandemic substantially disrupted organizations' work, they also offered an opportunity to pause, reflect, and engage in transformational internal culture work and more focused community relationship building. Likewise, the intense dialogue about racial justice demanded that organizations get even clearer on their vision and values. These and other factors beyond the scope of the initiative influenced the change ArtsAmplified partners achieved:

- **Staff turnover.** Like organizations nationwide during this period, ArtsAmplified partners experienced significant leadership succession and staff turnover, which often made the work more challenging but also created an opportunity to onboard staff who were eager to work in community-engaged, civic-minded ways.
- **Institutional values.** Several ArtsAmplified partners pointed to the importance of articulating and socializing institutional values to effectively make change. This was particularly salient for organizations attempting to share authority with community partners, advance internal culture change, and activate civic commitments.
- **Fundraising capacity.** Some ArtsAmplified partners added development staff and enhanced their fundraising infrastructure, viewing these investments as essential to supporting community-centered, civic-minded work that prioritizes impact over transactional relationships with audiences.
- **Board engagement.** Many ArtsAmplified partners noted the importance of having an engaged, committed board through their change journeys. Not only were boards a source of financial support, but they also co-led change with staff leadership and encouraged bold, strategic thinking.
- **Change management.** Most ArtsAmplified partners relied on a range of change management skills, mindsets, and perspectives throughout their change journeys. Some emphasized the importance of making space for mistakes, productive failure, and



Photo by Melissa Henry, image courtesy The Greenway Conservancy.

iteration. Others highlighted the courage it takes to let go of programming that no longer served a new direction.

The design of the initiative itself was also an influential factor in partners' change journeys. The ArtsAmplified cohort provided community with other arts practitioners and an important forum for sharing perspectives, ideas, and information that strengthened each organization's work. The spirit of partnership and trust created by the Barr Foundation—and underscored by robust consultant thought-partnership throughout—created space for iteration and the freedom for each organization to chart its own course with rigorous support. The initiative duration gave them a long runway to advance real change, while the unique combination of unrestricted grants plus supplemental funding and risk capital enabled organizations to try new things while sustaining core work.

"There's tremendous change we need to see in the world. If you don't have a staff internally who feels comfortable and confident in working across difference, it doesn't matter how much you financially resource it, it's not going to grow. It's going to break."

ArtsAmplified partner

Lessons and considerations for arts funders

Grantmakers can:

- **Invest in organizations already committed to organizational change.** In ArtsAmplified, the Barr Foundation focused on organizations that were ready to undertake change. By selecting those with existing eagerness to invest in change, Barr could focus on supporting their self-determined journeys rather than incentivizing them to make change or guiding them toward a particular destination.
 - **Give grantees a long runway with multiyear funding commitments.** ArtsAmplified partners appreciated the security of long-term support, which enabled them to take on bigger organizational challenges and make longer-term commitments to artists, communities, and other partners. The multiyear commitments gave organizations the confidence to tackle substantial organizational change with the potential to transform who they are, how they operate, and the nature of their civic footprint.
 - **Create space for organizations to build community with each other.** Despite some critiques of initial collective learning aims, all ArtsAmplified grantees cited the cohort component as a meaningful, cherished part of their experience with the initiative. Gatherings with other organizations provided essential opportunities for peer mentorship, insight-sharing, and solidarity-building, while also sparking new programmatic partnerships. For new leaders and staff, having access to a structured community for peer support accelerated their ability to put their own organization's challenges and opportunities in a broader context.
 - **Pair unrestricted operating support with risk capital to help organizations navigate dual imperatives.** Like many nonprofit organizations, ArtsAmplified partners needed to operate on two time horizons at once: keeping their current work going and adequately resourced in the near-term, while also evolving their work toward a longer-term vision. Unrestricted operating support provided essential stability and freed up brain space to think about the long term.
- Risk capital empowered organizations to make bolder moves in the long term without worrying that they're sacrificing short-term security in the meantime.
- **Be explicit about the purpose of an initiative's conceptual framework.** ArtsAmplified included a framework encouraging participants to explore artistic excellence, relevance, risk-taking, and civic leadership. This provided a valuable structure for thinking about their change goals, without limiting the scope of what they could take on. In the early years of the initiative, however, some partners viewed the framework as Barr's prescriptive vision for what they should be trying to achieve. They needed to hear more directly that the framework was intended simply as a tool to shape dialogue and discovery.
 - **Consistently communicate future funding plans beyond the initiative end date.** Despite any funder's best intentions, it's natural for grantees to grow concerned about the end of an initiative that has provided them with critical funding for many years—and the ArtsAmplified experience was no exception to this norm. It is simply not possible to overcommunicate with grantees about what they can reasonably expect from the funder when the current initiative expires.
 - **Consider engaging intermediaries as thought partners.** Challenging power dynamics can show up even when a funder is consciously working to counter them. With this in mind, the Barr Foundation engaged consultants as critical stewards of the work: conducting coaching calls with ArtsAmplified partners, guiding them in the development of theories of change for their work, and offering feedback on supplemental funding requests. In this capacity, intermediaries provide grantees a trusted thought partner with whom they can share first-draft thinking.

Intermediaries, consultants, and grantmakers can:

- **Lead with humanity.** ArtsAmplified organizations praised the compassionate, humane approach that Barr Foundation staff and consultants took throughout the initiative, citing it as essential for building true, honest partnerships. Building relationships with multiple staff members at each organization, learning who they are as people, engaging with the consequences of change for individuals and the organization, and demonstrating that they were rooting for success (not looking for an opportunity to withhold support) all conveyed the deep humanity of the initiative.
- **Let co-design process flow from purpose.** Co-design can help ensure that an initiative genuinely responds to grantees' needs and goals, but it can also require significant grantee time and energy. It's important that the process generates the benefits of co-design without unduly taxing grantees. For ArtsAmplified, the Barr Foundation opted to gather input on an organization-by-organization basis—which ensured that the initiative and its activities were designed to address the full range of individual grantee needs, while putting most of the time and decision-making burden on the foundation and its consultant partners. But the initiative could have gone down another road, leaning into the potential of its cohort to become a platform for identifying shared goals and a space for developing plans for collective action on a shared agenda for fieldwide change. This would have demanded a much more collective co-design process, in which grantees listened to each other's needs and goals, negotiated shared priorities, and designed structures and activities to advance them. It also would have required an initial investment in building relationships and social capital within the group, so that they saw themselves as a community with a shared identity early on. This more time-intensive approach wasn't right for ArtsAmplified, but it remains worth considering for funders that want an initiative to serve as an effective container for a community of practice, peer learning, and/or collective action.
- **Enable organizations to set their own goals while providing meaningful support to facilitate progress.** ArtsAmplified combined elements of both strategic and trust-based philanthropy paradigms: It was grounded in a clear vision and focused on organizations whose own goals aligned with that vision. It also created ample space—through flexible support and an explicit understanding that plans may change—for the foundation and grantee partners to shape the vision together.



Photo by Maria Moleni, image courtesy The Greenway Conservancy.

"It has been an honor to walk alongside these leaders, and we are immensely proud of their courage and the transformative work they have led within their organizations and communities."

San San Wong
Senior Advisor, Barr Foundation